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ABSTRACT

A seminar was held at the Harvard Graduate School of Education in August 1987 on the subject, "Illiteracy and the Underclass: Are They Permanent?" The contributions of Chall, Comer, Epstein, Dash, and Rivera identified where illiteracy problems begin--in families with intergenerational patterns of illiteracy. Problems in estimating the numbers of illiterate adults in society and the work force were addressed by Harman and Sticht. The question of a growing and permanent underclass and the cost of remediating disadvantages were examined by McFate. Successful community-based literacy programs and the connection between literacy and employability were described by Garvey and Strucker. Problems in writing about poverty and illiteracy in the media were addressed by a panel of editors and reporters. (Ten story ideas for reporters and editors doing articles about literacy are identified in the document. Addresses and telephone numbers for the 13 seminar contributors are included, along with addresses and telephone numbers of 4 agencies dealing with illiteracy.) (CML)

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# The Literacy Beat

*A special newsletter of the Education Writers Association*

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

## ILLITERACY: CHICKEN OR EGG?

Illiteracy pervades families stressed by urban poverty, but the patterns contributing to illiteracy may have begun several generations past. Is illiteracy permanent among such families? No, it doesn't have to be. Among adults, is illiteracy creating an underclass? No, not by itself. Are these issues which reporters can make interesting to readers? Yes, especially if they are able to use them to tell stories.

The Education Writers Association seminar on "Illiteracy and the Underclass: Are They Permanent?" attracted more than 30 participants to the Harvard Graduate School of Education Conference Center in early August. At the end of two days of provocative discussion with many experts on literacy, reporters probably had more questions than answers about the interaction between urban poverty and illiteracy. But they also had some definite clues about where to apply good investigative reporting skills.

### Where Illiteracy Problems Begin

If children have not acquired decoding skills in reading by the end of the third grade, they are in deep trouble. Harvard University professor Jeanne Chall pointed out that teachers in grades 1-3 know how to teach reading. After that, reading instruction "fizzles out." The gains in reading achievement posted by 9-year-olds in the National Assessment of Educational Progress reports are tapering off, she said, because teachers now are spending too much time on comprehension and budget cuts have reduced the number of remedial reading teachers.

However, reading problems begin even before children come to school, Dr. James Comer, Yale University psychiatrist and director of its Child Study Institute, said. His research and school demonstration projects have focused on low income minority children. The support systems that once existed for poor black children largely disappeared in the post-World War II era, he said, noting that until that time 80 percent of black children lived in two-parent families. In his own case, he said, his mother had no schooling and his father only went as far as the sixth grade, but their five children acquired a total of 13 higher education degrees. The black church and the political process empowered families in the community in which he grew up, Comer said, and the families were able to work with the schools.

Minority children today fail to acquire inner direction and control before they enroll in school, characteristics they once learned from their families and support systems. Their problem is "underdevelopment" not inability, he said, but teachers are not trained to deal with social underdevelopment. Believing that "children will learn because meaningful people want them to learn," Comer has developed strategies for elementary schools that pull parents into helping manage a social development curriculum. Such collaboration, he said, "empowers everyone in the school." Schools must enlist parents in meaningful work with their children before they can hope to help parents improve their own literacy. Further, he said some young children need consistency in their relationship with an adult; thus, they should have the same teacher for more than one year.

Supporting the parents' role in helping children learn was emphasized by Joyce Epstein, a researcher at the Johns Hopkins University. Her studies of elementary schools found only 4 percent of parents actively involved with the schools; 75 percent of parents never come to the school, 65 percent of whom are working mothers. Yet, she said, when parents use

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educating practices at home with their children, "social class as a factor in learning drops out." However, "teachers are not involving parents in learning because they are not trained to nor are they told that it should be a priority."

Another presenter who found early patterns of school failure was Leon Dash, Washington Post investigative reporter, who lived in the lowest socioeconomic neighborhood of Washington, D.C., for 17 months to gather material for a series on teenage pregnancy. The children in the families he studied "start school with a great deal of enthusiasm, but they eventually have to deal with a curriculum they cannot handle. They begin having trouble by the time they are in the third grade, and by the sixth grade they know they will not finish." Further, poor parents are intimidated by the schools, he said.

Dash discovered other, equally disturbing patterns. Among poor black families, he said, "the best predictor of a teenager's first pregnancy is the age of her mother at her first birth." He contends that an acceptance of teenage pregnancy among blacks can be traced to the time of sharecropping when having children early had an economic value. Girls often had to prove their ability to bear children before men would marry them, he said. (Comer also said that cultural patterns of economic dependency developed among rural blacks after slavery, a pattern that could have been broken by education).

Still another view on the importance of family support came from John Rivera, the counselor hired by industrialist Eugene Laing of New York to work with the sixth grade he "adopted" and promised to put through college. Rivera's counseling and advocacy "filled the gap" created by the lack of strong families knowledgeable about how to deal with schools and find resources for their children. Both Rivera and Dash mentioned that school personnel treated a student better once they knew an "outsider" with some clout was interested in the student.

Rivera also said the real significance of the "I Have a Dream" program, Laing's idea which now has spread to 15 cities and 100 adopted classes, is that it "is turning people with political and economic power into fiesty advocates for young people." (Felix Rohatyn, head of the Municipal Assistance Corp. in New York City and another adopter of a public school class, recently made a tough offer to the city schools. MAC will give them $600 million for buildings if the school system trims its bureaucracy and hires a counselor for every 60-90 students.)

## The Problem of Adult Illiteracy

The sources, definitions of and solutions for adult illiteracy are not as easy to distinguish as they are for young children. However, the general perception given by researchers and community literacy workers at the seminar is that more honesty is needed about the field.

The wide disparity among estimates of the number of illiterates in the United States is due to different and sometimes shoddy definitions of literacy, said David Harman of Teachers College, Columbia University and author of two books on literacy. In World War I literacy was set at a fourth grade education, a level upped to the fifth grade in World War II but lowered again for the Korean War. There is no accepted national standard today, Harman said, but generally it is considered that anything less than a ninth grade education "doesn't give one much access." Harman and others pointed out that literacy may be perceived as a larger problem today because literacy standards have been raised; few job opportunities exist for those without at least rudimentary skills.

However, Harman said society's disinterest in valuing literacy (or "aliteracy") is a more serious problem than illiteracy. He challenged the view that higher literacy rates are needed for economic competition (as did panelists the next day). If the country has 27 million illiterates, the most common definition, and only 6 million unemployed, "there are a lot of illiterates in the labor force." It is wrong, he said, "to urge that work cannot occur because of low literacy skills." Higher reading skills may be needed in the future, he added, but only for a diminishing number of people involved in high tech.

Harman also charged that "it is dishonest to think that we can solve the problem with hordes of volunteers teaching people." The dropout rate from literacy programs is about 50 percent, he said, and of those graduating from literacy programs about one-half regress to their former level of literacy within four years.

Some of Harman's points were underscored by Thomas Sticht of San Diego, a researcher on literacy and job training. Naming 10 "maliteracy practices," he said those with

a fifth through ninth grade level of education are not illiterate, but marginally literate. In the workplace, they too frequently are shunted into basic skills training, modeled after the practices of public schools where they already have failed once. Adults learn better if literacy is presented in the context of job skills that a person can use immediately; further, women can learn technical skills as well as men if they are presented in contexts with which they are familiar (repairing a hair dryer, for example). Also, persistence is underplayed as a factor in acquiring good literacy skills, he said.

Sticht and others warned reporters of the overselling of computer technologies as a solution to illiteracy. And they said standardized tests are being misused to evaluate literacy programs (different tests or forms of tests are used for entry and exit from programs, skewing results).

## Is There an Underclass?

Despite varying opinions about the severity of the literacy problem, does American society face the problem of a growing and permanent underclass? Katherine McFate, researcher with the Joint Center for Policy Studies in Washington, D.C., said journalists invented the term but there is some truth to the existence of long-term dependency. Contrary to popular belief, however, long-term welfare families tend to have only one or two children, not the large families frequently mentioned in the media. Black unemployment is consistently high, and black employment consistently low, she said. A Joint Center publication reported on a conference which arrived at a definition of the underclass--"poor people who live in a neighborhood or census tract with high rates of unemployment, crime and welfare dependency." (Comer, however, warned against developing journalese around the phrase "culture of poverty." That implies, he said, that poor people created their situation and that they find value in it.)

A range of programs can ease families out of dependency, including prenatal care, early childhood programs and day care and compensatory education. However, the cost is high. To extend early childhood education to all disadvantaged children would cost an additional $2.5 billion. Investment in adult literacy is miniscule, McFate said, with the federal share about $98 million serving 3 million adults.

## Views from the Trenches

Much of what the researchers reported about illiteracy was confirmed by panelists working with community-based literacy programs. English-as-a-second-language programs have greater success than others because those enrolled are better motivated, but beyond that, not many adults progress in adult literacy programs, said John Garvey of the Learning Assistance Center in New York City. The programs are not good at recruiting very low skilled adults, the retention rates are "abysmal," and for those who stick with it, progress is minimal. He added that the reason people are unemployed is not a function of literacy, but of other factors, such as racial discrimination in unions.

There is a connection between literacy and employability, countered John Strucker of the Community Learning Center of Cambridge, but it tends to be at the extremes--those with very poor literacy skills and those in jobs that need very high literacy skills. The current "problem" does not result from the workforce suddenly becoming stupid, he said. "If so, corporations would be moving to Sweden instead of Haiti." Business wants greater problem solving skills but "in a very narrow band," he said.

## Implications for Reporters

A panel of reporters/editors who have written about literacy agreed the issues discussed at the seminar were important but difficult to get column space for or write about. "Newspapers are in the business of telling stories," said Bill Grant, a producer with Nova and former reporter/editor with papers in Detroit and San Francisco. The problem in writing about the poor or underclass, he added, is that it is done in pieces, while the fabric of their lives consists of many factors--health, education, social problems, jobs. A hopeful sign is that reporters allowed to cover the problems of the poor from a total viewpoint produced articles that caught the public's attention. Dash's series on teenage pregnancy stimulated community debate. So did a series prepared by Kathy Lally of the Baltimore Sun on the education, family and neighborhood influences on one high school class she followed for a year. Muriel Cohen of the Boston Globe said she tried to balance, in her series of articles on literacy, the personal story with views of experts.

**QUESTIONS**

The presentations and discussions at the Cambridge seminar raised some interesting questions/ideas for reporters and editors on "telling stories" through articles about literacy.

* What kind of contact do poor parents have with schools? What do they think about their children's teachers and schools? What happens at the school level, from the teachers' and administrators' viewpoint, to encourage parent involvement?

* When do poor children "hit the wall" in school, the point at which what they need to know overtakes the knowledge they bring into the schools? The third grade? The fourth grade? Do teachers see problems and adjust for them?

* What kind of counseling services do poorer children receive, in comparison to students from other socioeconomic levels? In comparison to national standards for counseling? What kind of problems do parents ask advocacy or other groups to help them with in relation to the schools?

* How well coordinated are the services needed by poor families--health, education, welfare, job training? What problems do families face in trying to piece the services together?

* What are the educational levels of long-term, welfare-dependent families? Are they different from those who are poor but not dependent on welfare?

* What are the specific job skills employers want? How do personnel directors of local businesses assess the skills of high school graduates? What records do they have of retraining needs? (Muriel Cohen is skeptical of such programs as the Boston Compact because businesses are not specific on their needs and do not have data to back up their claims about unprepared entry-level workers. Under the Boston Compact, an idea being adopted in other large cities, local businesses guarantee a certain number of jobs to high school graduates if the schools improve such indicators as student achievement and retention.)

* What are the skill requirements of new jobs in your area? What literacy levels are needed for them? What are the projections regarding new employment and literacy levels? How are these projections developed?

* What's your local story about the General Education Diploma (GED)? Researchers at the seminar said it was becoming less and less worthwhile. The military is no longer accepting the GED, primarily because it does not reflect persistence by the learner. Yet, older adolescents are dropping out to go the GED route and it is still a standard goal of literacy programs.

* What part do learning disabilities play in adult illiteracy? Community literacy workers warned against creating a new category of adults, but Jeanne Chall believes a large percentage of adults with low literacy skills have learning disabilities that were not detected in school.

* How effective are adult literacy programs? What is their dropout rate? How are they evaluated? How are they tied to employment? Has the current emphasis on "illiteracy" discouraged people from seeking help? If literacy programs for those who do not speak English are more popular and effective, why?

THE LITERACY BEAT: UPDATE

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vol. 1, no. 2

## Resource Information

Below are addresses and phone numbers of the persons referred to in this edition as well as other resource information brought to our attention since the publication of the first edition of Literacy Beat.

**Jeanne Chall**, Harvard Graduate School of Education, Appian Way, Cambridge, MA 02138; (617) 495-3521

**Muriel Cohen**, The Boston Globe, 135 Morrissey Boulevard, Boston, MA 02107; (617) 929-2000

**Dr. James Comer**, Maurice Falk Professor of Child Development, Child Study Center/Yale, P.O. Box 3333, New Haven, CT 06510; (203) 785-2548

**Leon Dash**, 4524 32nd Street, Mt. Rainier, MD 20712; (301) 864-8540

**Joyce Epstein**, Professor of Sociology and Principal Researcher, Middle Schools Program, Center for Effective Elementary and Secondary Schools, Johns Hopkins University, 3505 North Charles Street, Baltimore, MD 21218; (301) 338-7570

**John Garvey**, Literacy Assistance Center, 15 Dutch Street, 4th Floor, New York, NY 10038; (212) 267-5309

**William Grant**, Executive Director, NOVA WGBH, 84 Barnard Avenue, Watertown, MA 02172

**David Harman**, Professor of Education and Research Associate, Elbenwood Center for the Study of the Family as Educator, Teachers College, Columbia University, 72 Spring Street, New York, NY 10012; (212) 925-5831

**Kathy Lally**, The Baltimore Sun, 501 North Calvert Street, Baltimore, MD 21203; (301) 332-6164

**Katherine McFate**, Joint Center for Political Studies, 1301 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W., Suite 400, Washington, DC 20004; (202) 626-3500

**John Rivera**, I Have a Dream Program, 1280 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10029; (212) 876-8100

**Thomas Sticht**, Applied Behavioral and Cognitive Sciences, P.O. Box 6640, San Diego, CA 92106; (619) 224-2810

**John Strucker**, Community Learning Center of Cambridge, 614 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02139; (617) 267-9400

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**Center for the Study of Writing**, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720. Contact: Sarah Freedman, (415) 643-7022. *Conducts research on writing and instruction and the interaction of writing with reading, speaking and computers.*

**Gannett Foundation**, Lincoln Tower, Rochester, NY 14604. Contact: Kathleen Ferguson Chapman, Communications/Staff Writer, (716) 262-3315. *In 1986, Gannett gave approximately $540,000 for a range of adult literacy projects throughout the*

*country, including $150,000 for the Urban Literacy Development Fund, cited in the first issue of the* Literacy Beat. *More recently, the Foundation gave grants totaling $1.25 million to 12 states and Puerto Rico as part of its Literacy Challenge, a two-year program launched in 1986 in cooperation with* USA Today *that is designed to stimulate cooperative state-level leadership among adult literacy groups and agencies throughout the country.*

**Reading Reform Foundation**, 333 W. 57th Street, Room 211, New York, NY 10019. Contact: Margaret Whelan, Director, (212) 307-7320. *Publishes the* Reading Informer *and has been involved in reading and literacy issues since the early 1960s.*

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*The address and contact person for the Education Department's Adult Literacy Initiative were listed incorrectly in the last issue of the* Literacy Beat. *The address and contact person are:*

**U.S. Department of Education**, Room 510, Reporters Building, 400 Maryland Avenue, S.W., Washington, D.C. 20202. Contact: Karl O. Haigler, Director, Adult Literacy Initiative, (202) 732-2959.